

The Joy of Original Sin

SEXUAL DESIRE

A Moral Philosophy of the Erotic.

By Roger Scruton.

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By Richard A. Shweder

ROGER SCRUTON is not a sexologist and this is not a sexy book. He is an English philosopher and a founder of the Conservative Philosophy Group, which advises the Thatcher Government. He views the Enlightenment as a perversion, and his goal in "Sexual Desire" is to dignify the sexual act of heterosexual lovers by restoring to modern consciousness a sense of original sin.

His book is illiberal, antifeminist, anti-Freudian, antilibertarian, and anti-free market. Mr. Scruton defends the "truths" of traditional sexual morality — that fidelity, modesty and shame are virtues, that masturbation, promiscuity and homosexuality are vices — and he undertakes a mission to save "sexual morality from the morass into which modern ways of thinking have enticed it." It is a stunning achievement that is bound to be viewed in the wrong light from both sides of the political spectrum.

Mr. Scruton's illiberalism is so ecumenical it reaches across centuries, indicting not only contemporary liberals but also those 19th-century liberals (the "free to choose" crowd) who now call themselves neo-conservatives. Liberalism is described as "the natural philosophy of a desacralized world," secular morality as incompetent to give cogency to prohibitions, freedom of contract as the enemy of any institution that would enlarge the human spirit. "Nature abhors a vacuum," says Mr. Scruton, "and the voiding of religious meanings has not emptied the world of superstition." By superstition he has in mind the idea of progress.

Mr. Scruton's argument is intended as a premodern celebration of an archaic trinity: the sacred, the soul, and the subjugation of our appetites to the idea of the good. He seeks to stimulate "the intrusion into the human world of obligations that cannot be created by an act of choice, which therefore demand a transcendental meaning." When it comes to sexual desire, the relevant intrusion is a romantic doctrine of original sin that ennobles the act of love. Original sin, according to Mr. Scruton, is an unhappy fact about human nature, whose recognition is a prerequisite to human happiness.

The central transcendental meaning of "Sexual Desire" is a conception of human nature as dualistic, the spirit in the flesh, the person in the animal, the free will incarnate. Trapped forever, as we are, between the angels and the animals, each of us a free spirit dwelling in a body, human beings cannot attain happiness, in Mr. Scruton's opinion, apart from a sense of tragedy ("we are never so revealed as animals as in the sexual act"). That sense of tragedy, a fear of humiliation by the body, then lends significance to the unperverted human sexual act, as a heroic struggle against the fall and as a scheme for ennoblement that no animal has ever conceived. Mr. Scruton defines mature sexuality as the disposition to perceive the "body as spirit," to summon the soul to the flesh, "to find the marks of another's perspective displayed on the surface of his body." In his conception, human sexuality, in its "normal" form, becomes definitive of our humanity, a ritual of integrity for embodied souls that separates us from the beasts.

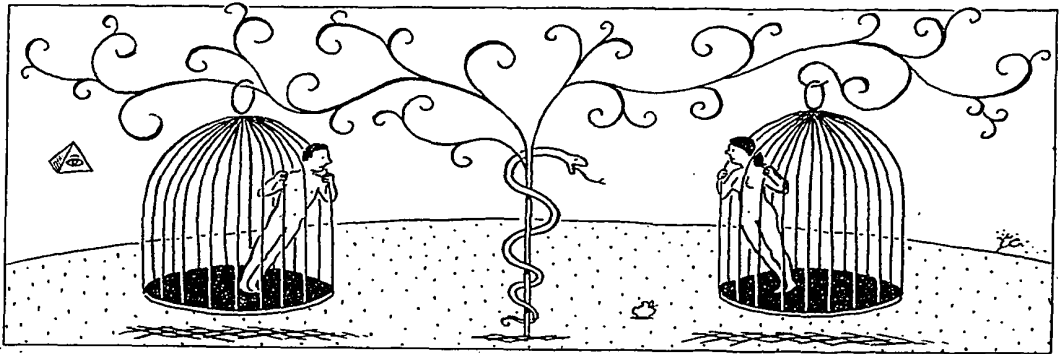
Mr. Scruton wants to understand the aim or goal of sexual desire from the inside out. Tracing the phenomenology of the human sexual experience through four stages of development (arousal, desire, intimacy and love), he draws as many distinctions as he needs to circumscribe a unique humanizing aspect of mature adult sexuality. Defending the boundaries between person

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and animal, desire and appetite, male and female, adult and child, Mr. Scruton cloisters in privilege our sexual desires and makes them special; in no other species, he claims, is sex a cooperative design upon the spirit of another. In effect, Mr. Scruton isolates human sexuality from the creaturely appetites of the rest of creation.

Much that is at stake in the book turns on Mr. Scruton's answers to such questions as: Is animal behavior "mediated by, and expressive of, a conception of itself"? Is human sexual desire fundamentally different from our appetite for carrots? According to Mr. Scruton, appetites "transfer;" it is the same appetite no matter which carrot you eat, and any one carrot, a mere means to an end, is just as good as another. Human sexual desire, however, at least in its mature (nonanimal) form, is not like that. The unique object of desire (union with the self of the particular person you love) is "part of the end of desire"; alter the object and you alter the desire. It is Mr. Scruton's thesis that "You, irreplaceable you" is not something we would whisper to a carrot, and that only a human being could conceive of such an uplifting idea.

Mr. Scruton likes to emphasize the differences between things and underplay their likenesses; so he knows where to look for his enemies. Defending his no-



tion of sexual desire as a ritual for embodied souls aimed at transcending the dualism of human nature, he excoriates the sociobiologists for treating persons as animals, preliterary people for treating animals as persons, feminists for violating the boundary between male and female, Freudians for blurring the distinction between the adult and the child (psychoanalysis also stands accused of dispensing "absolution for our criminal emotions"). Plato takes the rap for disembodiment the soul, for setting aside the body as mere animal appetite and for taking the sex out of erotic love.

Armed with a notion of normal sexual desire derived from a dualistic theory of human nature, Mr. Scruton has a lot to say about what is perverse and what is obscene. The obscene represents the body as mere body. Perversions treat the object of desire as a means, not an end in itself. Bestiality, prostitution and promiscuity are easy cases for Mr. Scruton: clear-cut perversions. Sadoomasochism and masturbation are more complex, for they come in normal and perverted varieties. Homosexuality turns out to be a tough case (after all, the difference between male and female might be seen as merely a feature of the body, not the spirit). Nevertheless, through an analysis claiming that gender reaches deep into the soul (even the gods have gender), Mr. Scruton contrives to get homosexuality to fall. Don Juan survives, however, as a fascinating exaggeration of mature sexuality. Don Juan is not promiscuous; he just has an infinite capacity for genuine love.

Reading "Sexual Desire," some folks on the right are going to feel as if they have come of age: it is what every conservative has always believed about sex but needed a philosopher to justify. The book is bound to be seized upon as a kind of manifesto by some bemused true believer advocating stricter regulations against pornography and obscenity. A placard comes to mind: Put the body politic back in body politics! Readers on

the left are going to view it as personal disgust, glorified a priori truth by a religiously inclined moral interventionist disguised as an English philosopher — and they are going to recoil at the thinly veiled authoritarianism and elitism of the author.

I suggest another kind of reading. Mr. Scruton has ventured into ancient territories currently under occupation by orthodox and fundamentalist religious sects, who seem to be the only ones with a sophisticated discourse for talking about personal sanctity, spiritual cleansing and the human body as sacred ground. While modern liberals and neoconservatives are mute on such topics, many traditional societies are scrupulous in their attention to the body as a temple for the spirit, often developing such an integrated view of person and flesh that illness is experienced with guilt and physical misfortune is viewed as an indication of moral transgression. Such feelings and perceptions are not totally absent among contemporary people, although they are, for the most part, repressed, dismissed or pushed off to some mental fringe. Nor is the experience of "soul-fullness" absent from modern sensibilities, although talk about the soul has come to be associated with theology, which means it is viewed by many moderns as prescientific, fuzzy-headed and mystical, and thus hardly wor-

thy of respect. "Sexual Desire" is a brave, deliberately provocative and excessively illiberal first step toward restoring the body as a moral universe to our collective consciousness. It would be a shame to leave our soul in the hands of the theologians, although I would not want to leave it in Mr. Scruton's hands either.

FEW modern readers will be convinced that a speculation about the nature of the soul, and about who has one, is a firm starting point for reasoning your way to absolute truth. The sharp boundaries maintained by Mr. Scruton (person versus animal, male versus female, each person unique) are too easily vaporized in alternative creative speculations about the soul in various religious traditions: the individual soul as a substitutable fragment of a world soul, a world soul without gender, souls that transmigrate across species and so on. Mr. Scruton is so antediluvian in his sensibility that he may have uncovered his own original sin — the sin of being far too discriminating, of making distinctions where none are necessary.

Reading "Sexual Desire," a visitor from another planet might think that the only place left in modern society to celebrate the human spirit is in your bedroom, as long as you do not do it alone; and our visitor would never suspect that a sense of decency, spiritual cleansing and sacred obligation might have had something to do with post-Enlightenment concerns for individual liberty, social justice and pluralism. If liberalism has any claim to privilege, perhaps it is because its proponents are fanatically permissive of heretical perceptions. They fear orthodoxy more than they fear obscenity. Keeping faith with the soul in its wanderings, an enlightened liberal conscience strikes a simple bargain with a complex human nature. It accepts perversity in exchange for creative diversity; and thereby it dignifies the human spirit and enables it to flourish. □